**Ancient Greece L.E.G.S. Essay**

Prologue

The civilizations of Ancient Greece began in around 1500 B.C., which was about the end of the Egyptian New Kingdom. Cities and communities began to appear on the mainland and the 400 neighboring islands of Greece. Some of the first cities were cities like Knossos, Troy, and Mycenae. They began as small cities, and towns, and then turned into large and sprawling city-states and empires.

Ancient Greek Government and Law

The first city/empire of Greece was the Minoan Civilization. They ruled over the island of Crete. Their capital city was Knossos. It was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world at the time. The city had a grand palace where the king stayed. The most powerful leader of the Minoan civilization was the king. He was in control of everything. The Minoans had a very centralized government, centered on the king. Then, the Mycenaean’s migrated into mainland Greece and conquered most of Greece, including Knossos and the Minoan civilization. Their capital city was Mycenae, located on the northern end of the Peloponnesian Peninsula. The Mycenaeans were ruled by a king and wealthy aristocrat nobles. The Mycenaean civilization disappeared in 1100 B.C.

After the fall of the Mycenaean civilization, Greece turned into a land full of warring city-states. There were times of great glory, and times of horrible events called “Dark Ages”. Some of the most powerful were: Ithaca, Troy [before it was beaten in war], Athens, Sparta, Ephesus, Thebes, Byzantium, Corinth, and many more. These states sometimes made alliances with one another. The governments of these states were monarchies, oligarchies, and one city-state formed the world’s first democracy. A monarchy is rule under a king, and oligarchy is the most powerful and wealthiest citizens forming an elite group that controlled the city. A democracy is a government where the people have a say, and most matters are decided by the population’s vote. The word democracy means: “*rule by the people”.*

The city-state of Athens started out as an oligarchical state controlled by aristocrats. The city of Athens was a great place to form a city. It was very close to the coast, and the city formed around a large plateau called the acropolis. Each Greek city-state had an acropolis, or the most important area of the city’s political and cultural districts. On the acropolis in Athens was the agora. The agora was a public meeting place where the political buildings of the city were located. The acropolis and the agora of Athens were controlled by the aristocrats, and it was where they lived. The common citizens lived in small farms and houses on basic roads around the acropolis.

One day, a wealthy man came in with a woman claiming to be the goddess of wisdom: Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. He demanded that he should be made king of the city, or Athena will destroy the city. The citizens agreed, and Athens went through a period of Monarchy. After a long era, the citizens of Athens rebelled, attacking the king’s palace on top of the acropolis. The city was now controlled by the citizens. One of the sons of the aristocrats, listening to the philosopher who made the idea of democracy, organized the citizens into a democracy, because he supported the idea. The citizen was the most important politician in Ancient Athens.

This began a Golden Age in Athens until the end of the Peloponnesian War. Many famous citizens and politicians rose to popularity from almost nothing, like the famous General Themistocles who won the battle of Salamis Strait. Many great production projects happened and were completed in this golden age. One example of this was the great temple to Athena at the top of the Acropolis called the Parthenon. The democracy of Athens main political area where most events divulged was the democratic assembly. Anybody could say or vote for something in this place. Considering the law of Athens, most cases were brought upon a jury, or group of people who voted if the charges against the person made him guilty or innocent. They weren’t judges or lawyers in the actual court, but the jury could be any citizen, like in the assembly. Every citizen had a say in Athens’ government of the people.

Ancient Greece and Athenian Society

The society of Ancient Greece, compared to Ancient Democratic Athens differs tremendously. A social pyramid is a “pyramid” with different levels that divide the population up, based upon wealth, size, and importance to the city. The social pyramid of most other Ancient Greek cities besides Athens was the same. It went: King [and or]/Aristocrats, common citizens, and then peasant/poor farmers or servants. The king and aristocrats controlled the city, the common people occupied most of the normal jobs of the city, and the poor/peasant farmers and servants worked for the more powerful people. Each of them differed greatly in importance to the city.

In Athens, everybody was considered equal. Of course, some people got more money than others and were more powerful, but every citizen made a difference in the government and town. It’s not communism, obviously, but everybody is equal. Nobody’s vote was more powerful than everyone else’s. Everyone had a job outside of the government, but they were all involved in the assembly and jury. Many morale/cultural ideas and systems came out of the society of Athens and Greece too, including democracy! Many people believe that theater, philosophy, organized sports, and great writing were born in Athens! This is very true. Most of the great Greek philosophers came out of Athens; Greek dramas were developed in Athens, but organized sports and great writing [epic poems: *The Odyssey, The Iliad*] came from Greece in general. The people of Athens especially were very cultured and produced a morale society, that’s known for its culture today!

Ancient Greek Empire and Conquest

The land of Greece started showing its military prowess in the Persian Wars, which lasted from about 500 B.C., to the 470s B.C. Two city-states shined above the rest in their battles and grand defense: Athens and Sparta. Sparta was a fierce military state, with the best fighting force in the Ancient World, but Athens was not known for its military, because it didn’t even have one! The common men of the city were armed with farming tools, swords, and spears, and the wealthy men got full battle armor with shields, phalanxes, swords, body armor, and more effects. The Persians had huge armies of millions of men in each. The Persian war started when Xerxes, the king of Persia sensed that the city-states of Greece were growing too strong and that they must be annihilated! The opening battle was the battle of Marathon, north east of Athens. The Athenian fighting force [described above on the last page] traveled to Marathon to defend their city from an attack in 490 B.C... The Persian army wasn’t as big as in future assaults, but to the Athenians, it was like Neptune, compared to Jupiter. The battle was bloody, brutal, but quick. Late in that day when the behemoth Persian Army wasn’t expecting it, the Athenians charged full-on to the Persian position and killed most of the Persian fighting force that wasn’t able to flee. The victory was desperate, but decisive.

After the first invasion, Sparta gained glory in the battle that would give them a reputation that can’t be matched today! It was the battle of Thermopylae, a mountain pass north of Delphi, that blocks the path to Athens, Delphi, Thebes, Sparta, and more southern Greek states. It took place in 480 B.C. It was 300 Spartans [in the beginning] supported by 700 Thebans [in the end of the battle] vs. 1 million Persian Immortals!!!! The battle was long and bloody, and the Spartan fighting force had killed 300,000 Persians until the Thebans arrived. The remaining Thebans retreated after the Spartan “war-machines” were all killed in the battle, fighting valiantly.

After this Greek defeat, the Persians reinforced under King Cyrus and marched on Athens. Themistocles, the citizen general proposed a plan that the Greek army and navy, made of powerful Triremes should evacuate Athens, and use the navy to fight the Persians at Salamis Strait. In 380 B.C., the Persians occupied Athens and attacked the Athenian Navy at Salamis Strait. The Persian Navy was completely out fought, by fierce Athenian tactics. This ended the Persian war. The General who led the Greek army/navy in the battles of Salamis, around, and after Salamis was the Athenian General Themistocles. He wasn’t a noble by birth. He gained his power and popularity through Athenian democracy. He was ostracized from the city, after the battles, because many people thought that he gained too much power.

Soon after the Persian war ended, a golden age happened in the city of Athens. This age lasted for a long time, but was beginning to deteriorate when the Peloponnesian War began. The Peloponnesian War began in the year 431 B.C. Some believe that this happened because Sparta and its allies started to grow jealous of Athens’ power. After the Persian War, Athens had the most powerful navy in Greece. It led the Dalian League, which was made to keep Persia out of Greece. They all had formidable navies, but Athens’ was the most powerful. Sparta and its allies wanted to stop Athens from becoming, and being recognized as the most powerful, and the best city-state of Greece. The political leader of Athens’ democracy at the time was Pericles, a born aristocrat, who was very rich and had a large presence in Athenian democracy. When Pericles knew that Athens’ armies wouldn’t stop the Spartans, he built a wall connecting Athens, with its main port town, the Piraeus.

Spartan’s Army of Hoplite soldiers won most of the battles on land, and Athens’ navy of powerful Trireme battleships, won most of the battles out on sea. The Spartans surrounded the city wall of Athens, and burned the farms outside, hoping to starve the city. This strategy didn’t work, because the Athenians imported food from the Aegean Sea, of which they still controlled with their powerful navy. The war seemed to be a bloody stalemate, but later in the war, a plague broke out in Athens which killed a third of the citizens, including Pericles. Without proper leadership, the politicians who were the most powerful began to make many mistakes. They tried to expand their empire by seizing the island of Sicily so they could attack the Spartans from both sides, but it wasn’t a fruitful campaign, almost the exact opposite. The colony didn’t work well at all. Then, the Spartans got past Athens’ weakened navy and cut off the food suppliers of Athens to the east. Athens surrendered in 404 B.C. It was a humiliating defeat…. The golden age of Athens started good, and ended in a disaster. The war did Sparta little good either. It had been a complete waste of resources.

“I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep, I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.” This quote was said by Alexander, son of Philip II, student of Aristotle, and young conqueror of Persia. His story began after the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian War ruined most of Greece, besides Macedonia, a state in northern Greece near a river delta that emptied into a bay connected to the Aegean Sea. Philip II, ruler of Macedonia, planned to conquer all of Greece. Another leader and orator of Athens named Demosthenes convinced all of the Greek city-states besides two to unite against Macedonia. They’re armies were crushed by the Macedonians. The two city-states that didn’t join him and heeded Macedonia’s warning were spared. Philip II defeated the Greeks in 338 B.C. His son, Alexander, helped him in his campaigns when he was 18-years-old. When Alexander turned twenty, his father was murdered. Some thought that, “glory-thirsty”, Alexander did it himself.

Alexander’s army that he inherited was equipped with many powerful weapons of the day. Some were: short-swords [with deadly hacking and stabbing power], phalanxes, large shields, mounted crossbows, a cavalry with weapons, bow-and-arrows, and more weapons. Alexander also had many strategies that are shown in many documentaries about the young conqueror from Discovery, History, and National Geographic Channel [I’ve watched some myself!!] They were the real reason that Alexander conquered all of Persia, the Indus River Valley, and had control in Egypt. He defeated the Persian Empire in 331 B.C. and in 326 B.C., they’d had enough and revolted. Alexander marched them home, but made them take wives from the places that they conquered, so that the populations could mix. He also founded many new cities in the territories that he conquered that didn’t have many cities [All of them were named Alexandria \_\_\_\_\_\_, what a surprise!!]. The most famous one is Alexandria in Egypt which still exists today. It is here that the lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the seven ancient wonders of the world was built. He conquered the largest empire and beyond in nine years! That is why he is called Great [Alexander the Great]. Alexander died in 323 B.C., in Babylon when he was 33 years old. He died at the young age of 33.

With the new mixed population, and the Greek empire, the cultures, sciences, religions, and more started to mix together. This blending of culture, blending together: Egypt, Asian, and Greek styles was called Hellenism. This influenced many future Mediterranean civilizations. Since Alexander had no child to inherit the empire, the empire broke up into states controlled by aristocrats and Generals. This struck the end of the Greek empire. New civilizations were emerging from the shadow of the Greek Age……